Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT): Frequently Asked Questions for Students in F-1 Status

Overview

What is Optional Practical Training?
Post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a 12 month period of practical training directly related to a student's level and major field of study. Generally these work experiences are off-campus or for non-student positions at ISU.

What steps must I take in order to complete the OPT application process?
1. Attend the OPT workshop in Cystart
2. Apply for OPT in Cystart
3. Receive email from ISSO to pick up OPT I-20
4. Gather OPT application documents
5. OPT application review by ISSO (optional)
6. Mail OPT application to USCIS
7. Receive receipt notice
8. Wait up to 90 days for adjudication
9. Receive EAD card in the mail
10. Start employment only after receiving EAD card and reaching employment start date listed on EAD
11. Use EAD to complete I-9 with employer

Eligibility

Who is eligible for OPT?
- Student in valid F-1 status
- Students completing a Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degree program
- Students who have completed a full academic year, which is defined as a fall and spring semester

Who is not eligible for OPT?
- Students who are now 60 days beyond the date on which all degree requirements were completed
- Students who used 12 months of OPT at the same educational level
- Students who used 365 days of full-time Curricular Practical Training at the same educational level
- Students in the Intensive English and Orientation Program
- Non-degree students

When am I eligible for OPT?
Bachelor's degree students:
- After completing all degree requirements
Master's without a thesis or creative component (coursework only):
- After completing all degree requirements
Master's degree with thesis or creative component or Doctoral degree students:
- As early as the completion of required coursework, and as late as the end of the semester of final defense

After completing degree requirements, can I retake courses and still be eligible for OPT?
Students must apply for OPT no later than 60 days after completing all degree requirements. Students cannot retake courses after completing their degree requirements and still be eligible for OPT.
Duration of OPT
How long can I do OPT?
OPT is an employment authorization granted for up to 12 months for all F-1 students.
- Students may request an additional 24-month extension if their major is on the Department of Homeland Security's STEM Designated Degree Programs list and student's employer is enrolled in E-Verify.

Can I request more than one period of OPT
Only if the student completes a new degree at a higher educational level.

Step 1: Workshop
Do I need to attend an OPT workshop?
Yes, students must attend the online OPT workshop in Cystart and complete the quizzes. A score of 100% is required in order to continue with the OPT application process.

Step 2: Cystart Request
When do I submit my OPT request to ISSO?
- Up to 120 days prior to the date all degree requirements are completed
- No later than 40 days following the date all degree requirements are completed (allows for ISSO processing)

When will U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) accept my OPT application?
- Up to 90 days prior to program completion date
- No later than 60 days after program completion date

How do you define program completion for immigration purposes?
- Bachelor's degree students:
  - Completion Date: Last day of the semester in which the final courses for the degree were taken
- Master's degree students in non-thesis programs
  - Completion date: Last day of the semester in which the final courses for the degree were taken
- Master's degree students with creative component or thesis and doctoral students have multiple interpretations for coursework completion:
  - The earliest is the last day in the semester in which the final POS coursework is taken (excluding research credits)
  - Students may choose the last day of any semester between POS completion and last day of semester in which they take the final oral defense
  - Final oral defense date
    - Must be scheduled before Cystart request
  - The latest is the last day of the semester in which a student takes their final oral defense
    - If a student defends in the interim period, the latest program completion date will be the previous semester end date. For example, if a student defends between the end of spring and beginning of summer terms, their I-20 end date will be the last day of the spring semester.

How does my program completion date affect my on-campus employment?
When applying for OPT, a student’s I-20 will be shortened to their program completion date. On-campus employment must end no later than their program completion date.
How do I submit the OPT request?
OPT requests can be submitted through an electronic process in Cystart. Students may log in to Cystart using their ISU NetID and password. Complete and submit the Optional Practical Training request found under F-1 Student Services tab.
- Academic/faculty adviser will receive an email from ISSO to comment on e-form. Only once the academic/faculty adviser reviews the e-form, the ISSO can start processing the OPT request.

What is the approximate timeline from submission of this request to ISSO to receipt of EAD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 working days:</td>
<td>ISSO processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 working days:</td>
<td>Mailing time</td>
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<tr>
<td>90 calendar days:</td>
<td>USCIS processing</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 calendar days:</td>
<td>Issuance and mailing of the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 working days:</td>
<td>Mailing time if student is no longer in Ames</td>
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What is the approximate timeline for ISSO to process this request?
10 working days after there is a check mark in all boxes on the Cystart Optional Practical Training request page. ISSO will not start processing an OPT request until the following steps have been completed:
- Student completed the OPT workshop
- Student submitted the OPT request through Cystart providing all necessary information
- Student’s academic/faculty adviser provided feedback on e-form

How will I know if my OPT request through Cystart has been approved?
ISSO will send an email to student’s ISU email address. If this email is not received after 10 working days, the ISSO encourages students to email isso@iastate.edu.

Step 3: Application to USCIS
Do I need to meet an ISSO advisor to complete my application?
No, students will meet with another staff member of the ISSO. Follow the instructions in the email sent by the ISSO.

What documents must I bring to ISSO to complete my application?
- Payment of $410
  - Personal check or money order made payable to U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or
  - Form G-1450 authorizing credit card payment
- Two identical, passport style photographs taken within the past 30 days
- Printed copy of the completed Form I-765 typed
- Printed copy of the completed Form G-1145 typed
- Copy of new I-20 with OPT recommendation on page 2, signed by ISSO advisor and student
- CPT authorization page printed from SEVIS (provided by ISSO)
- Copy of each of the following immigration documents:
  - I-94 card, front and back of original or print out of electronic I-94
  - Passport identity page
  - Passport page showing expiration date of passport
  - Passport page with most recent F-1 visa
  - I-20 forms with prior OPT endorsements on page 2, if any
  - Previous EAD from USCIS, if any
What more can you tell me about the required passport photographs?
For more information, see the Department of State's passport photo requirements.

Step 4: Mailing Authorization
What steps should I take if I want to mail the final application myself?
- Wait for the new OPT I-20 to be sent by mail. Once received, sign and date the I-20 in blue ink.
- Put the final application together in the order listed above, ensuring the check is on top.
- Review the final application one last time to ensure the dates are correct, signatures are included, and all documents are signed within 30 days of USCIS receiving the application.
- Upload a scanned copy of entire application in Cystart (request link by emailing isso@iastate.edu).
  - Include copies of all documents included in the final application as ISSO would need to reference these if the USCIS sends a Request for Evidence (RFE) to follow-up on the OPT application.
- Once ISSO confirms the application is complete and accurate, the student may mail it.

How should I mail the application if I choose to mail it myself?
ISSO recommends using FedEx for mailing and saving a scanned image of the completed application.

Where should I mail the application if I choose to mail it myself?
Find where to send the application here.

Pending Application
How will I know USCIS has received my application?
USCIS will send an email and/or text message to the phone number/email listed on Form G-1145. USCIS will also send the official I-797 Receipt Notice to the address listed on the Form I-765. It can take approximately 2 weeks to receive the email or text message from the date the OPT application is received.
- If a student has not received an email or text message after 2 weeks, they should first contact their bank to ask if their check for the OPT application fee has been cashed by USCIS. Second, if necessary, contact ISSO by email at isso@iastate.edu.

What if there is an error on my receipt notice?
Contact the ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.

How do I know when my 90-day processing time begins?
The Received Date on the I-797 Receipt Notice represents the beginning of the 90 days.

How do I check the status of my application?
Go to USCIS Case Status and enter the receipt number found on the receipt notice.

What is the average time from when the decision is made and when the EAD arrives at ISSO?
USCIS has indicated it can take up to 30 days before EAD is produced and mailed. ISSO generally receives the EAD within 10 days after USCIS says it has been delivered.

How will I know my EAD card has arrived at ISSO?
Once ISSO receives the EAD, ISSO will send an email to the student's ISU email account. If it has been more than 10 days since the USCIS Case Status system indicates the EAD card has been delivered and ISSO has not sent an email, contact the ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.
What do I need to do to pick up my EAD from ISSO?

- Students may stop by during normal business hours. A photo ID such as a passport, ISU card, driver's license is required to pick up the EAD.
- Students may designate someone else to pick up the EAD. To do so, students must email ISSO at isso@iastate.edu and specify the person who will pick up the EAD. Designated person must show photo I.D.
- Students may request the EAD to be mailed to their location. Request the card to be mailed by completing a Mailing Authorization e-form request in Cystart.

What if I want to change the dates of my OPT?
The employment start dates on OPT cannot be changed once the application has been mailed to USCIS. If the OPT application is still pending with ISSO, contact ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.

What if my OPT request is still pending and it is more than 90 days from the receipt date?
Contact ISSO at isso@iastate.edu.

What if I do not complete my program as planned?

- Students completing a bachelor's or master's degree without a thesis must contact an ISSO advisor immediately at isso@iastate.edu. Action must be taken before the completion date on the OPT I-20.
- Students completing a master's degree with a thesis or a doctoral degree may:
  - Choose to proceed with OPT request. No action required.
  - Choose not to proceed with OPT request. Contact ISSO immediately, as action must be taken before the completion date on the OPT I-20.

What if I want to withdraw my OPT application?
Contact the ISSO immediately at isso@iastate.edu. The request to withdraw the OPT application must be made prior to the start date on the EAD. Students will not receive a refund of the application fee.

During OPT

How many days can I be unemployed while on OPT?
During the 12 month period listed on the EAD card, a student is only allowed 90 days of unemployment. A student must leave the US, transfer to another school, or be accepted to a new degree program at ISU before reaching the 90 days of unemployment.

What types of positions are considered employment for OPT?
Paid or unpaid employment totaling 20 hours or more per week in a position related to the degree program, and can include the following forms of employment:

- Multiple employers
- Short-term multiple employers
- Work for hire
- Self-employed business owner
- Employment through an agency or consulting firm

Can I take classes during OPT?
The regulations indicate OPT is automatically terminated when a student begins study at another educational level or if a student transfers to another institution.
Travel and OPT

Can I travel outside the US while OPT is pending/approved?  
Yes, F-1 students may travel outside of the US while on OPT. However, there are some associated risks with travel on OPT. Students must carry additional documentation and may experience heightened scrutiny at the border. ISSO recommends students carry the following documents while travelling:

- Valid passport
- Valid visa
- I-20 with travel signature 
  - Travel signatures are valid for 6 months while on OPT
- I-797 receipt notice (if pending)
- EAD card (if approved)
- Verification of employment: letter documenting employment with company, tax documents, pay stubs, etc.

Reporting Requirements

What are the reporting requirements during OPT? 

- Must update living address within 10 days of moving.
- Must update employer information as soon as possible. If students fail to report employment on OPT, their SEVIS record will automatically terminate after 90 days of unemployment.

How do I submit reporting requirements? 

- To update employment information, students can do one of the following:
  - In SEVP Portal, enter updated information
  - In Cystart, complete the OPT Reporting Requirements e-form under F-1 Student Services tab

How do I access the SEVP Portal? 

After a student’s OPT application has been approved, SEVP will send an email on accessing the SEVP Portal. Using this email, students can access the SEVP Portal.

What do I do if I cannot access the SEVP Portal or I have been locked out? 

Email ISSO at isso@iastate.edu. An ISSO Advisor can assist you.

Where can I find more information on the SEVP Portal? 

Read more about the SEVP Portal at Study in the States website.

Disclaimer: This Frequently Asked Questions document is intended for general information and guidance. Please consult with an International Student and Scholar Advisor in the International Students and Scholars Office regarding your individual request.